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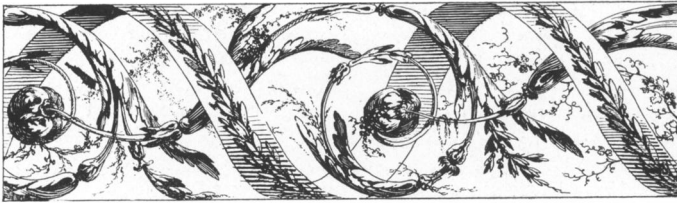
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NOTES ON THE EXHIBITION  
OF ORNAMENT

INVENTION in ornamental design, like invention in other fields, such as those of engineering and mechanics, is not so much a question of making something new as of adapting and using existing, well-known things in some combination peculiarly apt to the requirements of the special

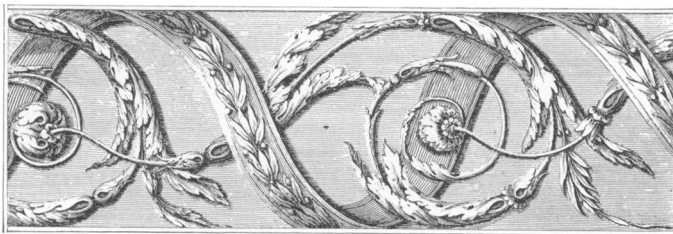
It is common enough to hear a painter say that he cannot work successfully unless he is given free play, that the limitations or rather the specifications of a "job" always hamper his individuality and his artistry. But, however true or logical such a feeling may be in the case of the painter, the ornamentalists have always been supported and aided by the very specific spatial limitations within which, and



FRIEZE, FRENCH, LOUIS XVI  
BY SALEMBIER

circumstances. The problem of design really consists of little more than the decorative breaking up of accurately defined surfaces, and it is therefore primarily a question of space distribution. Beautiful

conditions on which, they have had to work, so that the greatest of them have been those who, far from breaking down the limitations imposed upon them, have most freely and easily moved within them.



ENGLISH, XVIII CENTURY  
FROM SHERATON, THE CABINET-MAKER AND UPHOLSTERER'S  
DRAWING BOOK, LONDON, 1794

handling of spaces rather than discovery of new motifs or development of novel form is what most distinguishes the really great ornamentalists from the ruck. The old half-truth that artistry consists not in what is said but in how it is said is more nearly true in ornament than in any of the other arts, for the most trivial, the most banal, and the farthest fetched motifs have been those most frequently combined into the greatest masterpieces.

It thus follows, both a priori and as matter of fact, that the truest differentiation of the various styles and the several masters within them, certainly from the point of view of the student of the history of ornament and not improbably from that of the "practical" student of design, lies not so much in motifs as in spatial disposition. The unknown niellist, Zoan Andrea, Aldegrever, de Neufforge, Piranesi, Percier, and Adam, all used the same motifs—a

lingua franca of all times and conditions—and what differentiates them is solely their sense of scale and their ease of movement. Each style has its typical space within which to move, and without complete assimilation, complete comfort within that space and its correct scale, it has always been impossible to produce good work in that style. Now

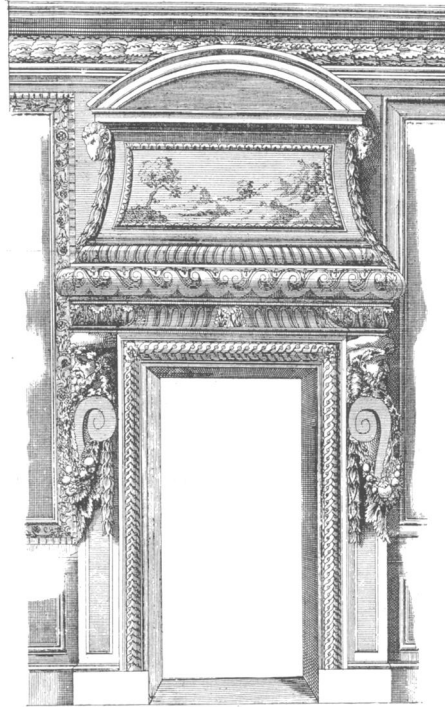
these spaces have never been twice the same in any succeeding periods because of the simple fact that they are based upon different social and economic facts and conventions. Comfort in sitting depends upon such things as military accoutrements, skirts, stays, and many other things, none of which are ever the same for any consecutive score of years—and comfort in sitting is what determines fundamentally the shapes, that is, the spaces, of chairs, which after all are neither more nor less than contrivances for the support of fully clad human bodies. The same thing is true in a more complicated and bigger way of rooms, hallways, and whole buildings, and everything that goes into their furnishing and decoration; for in every case they have been designed to meet certain demands which will never again occur in the same combination.

We all know how unlike and untrue are the figures of the participants in a fancy dress party when seen from a coign of vantage; the men's bodies do not swing properly from their hips, the women's backs

and the poise of their heads, the gait of both men and women, belie the most careful archæological research on the part of their costumers. We can't be anything other than what we are. And it is just this that underlies the failure of our present-day five-finger exercises in the "styles" of past times. It is a truism that a man of today

cannot write like Johnson or like Sterne, and it is just as obvious that a man of today cannot design or live in a house as the contemporaries of those men did. I am informed by one of our closest students of the history of house planning and decoration, himself a most eminent architect, that if two well-to-do families of the same number and ages, one of the period of Louis XVI and the other of today in New York, were to demand the same amount of space and the same degree of accessibility for their parlors, libraries, living and bed rooms, and were each to insist upon having the latest and most modern conveniences instal-

led, the house of the family of today would require at least twice the cubic volume that the other did. Twice the cubic volume cannot often be afforded and, naturally, as between "conveniences" and space we elect conveniences, with the result that if both houses are to be decorated in the same style, the spaces of today are diminished, and our scale inevitably thrown out. And this is merely one of many typical cases.



*An Inside Door for a Room of State*

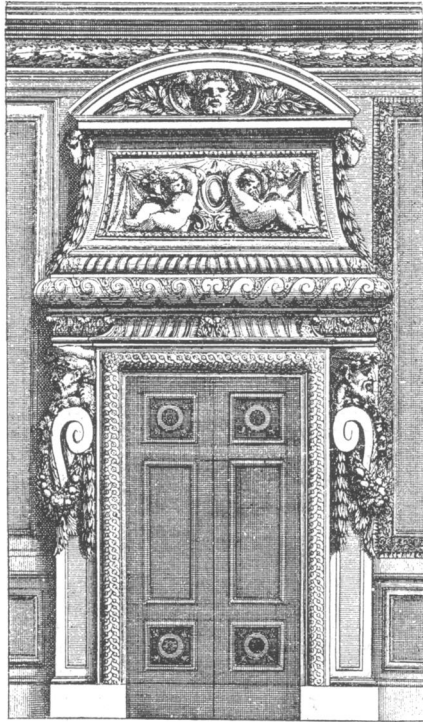
ENGLISH, XVIII CENTURY  
FROM BATTY LANGLEY, A SURE GUIDE  
TO BUILDERS, LONDON, 1729

The same thing is true even in borrowing contemporary foreign styles, for it too has all the impossibility of re-creation—has not someone said that archaeology begins at the frontier? The illustrations to this article contain two prime examples of this fact, each showing English borrowing of contemporary or nearly contemporary French work. The first “deadly parallel” is that between two doorways, one designed by Marot and the other by Batty Langley, the difference negligible so far as “design” goes, at most but slight simplifications in detail. The second case shows Sheraton playing the most sedulous ape to Salambier, copying as slavishly as he could every slightest incident in his band of ornament. The only difference in either case is one of scale—detail, shape, everything the same, but somehow in each case the French design has a swing, a power, an ease of movement that is native, as of some tongue spoken confidently, idiomatically, and without trace of foreign or provincial accent, while the English designs speak both with ungainly effort and with decided foreign burr. The most amusing incident of the kind, possibly, in the exhibition of ornament now on view, is that shown in the first floor case at the left of the stairs entering the print galleries, where there are shown side by side the outline engraving of a desk taken from Percier and Fontaine’s *Recueil de Décorations Intérieures*, published at Paris in 1812, and

the color print of a similar desk contained in an anonymous book of *Fashionable Furniture* published by Ackermann at London in 1823. Where Percier’s design has all the earmarks of style, uncomfortable, ungainly, if one will, yet somehow distinguished and rather fine, the English version, like Gentle Alice Brown’s mamma, is a “foolish, weak, but amiable old thing”—and this in spite of the fact that the pair are alike as two peas.

The exhibition of ornament affords many instances in which this difference in racial and time scale can be felt, and for this alone, if for nothing else, should be of interest to the casual visitor. The most hurried comparison, for instance, of the prints of interior decoration and objects by French artists from LePautre to Percier, all of whom worked within a period of little more than a hundred years, shows how important scale is, for in the work of no two men is it the same. It makes little difference whether the designs compared are as disparate as a LePautre ceiling, a

Berain gunlock, a Blondel mantel and mirror, a Meissonnier snuff box, a Germain candlestick, a Lalonde barometer, and a Percier desk, or a series of wall decorations, the same thing is true in each case—the space proportion of each master, of each period, is unique. Further proof of this can be found, if desired, in the series of big plates by Meissonnier, illustrating such diverse things as snuff boxes, needle- and scissors-



ORNEMENS OV PLACATS

FRENCH, XVII CENTURY, STYLE OF  
LOUIS XIII  
FROM GUILMARD, LES MAÎTRES  
ORNEMANISTES

cases, a sofa, a ceiling, a doorway with chairs at either side and a view of the next room, an overmantel, a sled, and the side of a gala reception room—all run true to type and, more important, to scale, even in spite of the fact that the snuff boxes in one print are full size, and the chairs in the next are no larger than the snuff boxes.

The exhibition contains a few objects showing how the engraved designs were used by the craftsmen of the time, but only enough to point the way to the craftsmen of today. It would be impossible to find anything drawn in more desperate perspective than most of the English furniture plates, or anything less capable of being turned into wood and upholstery without much planning and plotting—and for that reason our contemporary manufacturers look at them with more or less indifference. What they ask for is measured drawings showing mortises and tenons and accurate profiles, so that they can be turned into the shop without digestion. The plates in Chippendale display a violent tendency to have at least three different kinds of legs, and two different kinds of backs—and all wildly out of drawing. Yet under two of these plates is shown a chair, the legs of which come from one side of a chair in one plate, the top and splat from a chair in the other, and the sides of the back from another chair in the same plate; the result a perfect Chippendale chair, owing its individuality to the intelligence and the correlating power of the maker.

Among other examples of this kind, there is one in the exhibition which shows how useful, possibly how disquieting, the old engraved design may be to the connoisseur as well as to the student of ornament. In a case containing several pieces of Portuguese eighteenth-century silver, there are shown engravings taken from Germain's *Éléments d'Orfèvrerie* published in Paris in 1748. Doubtless the silver may have been made in Portugal—the writer has no knowledge or competency to discuss the subject—but the engravings, when the objects are confronted with them, prove that the silversmith who made them was most intimately acquainted with contemporary French

design, and that he was able so perfectly and so convincingly to render French design and feeling, that if not a Frenchman, he must have spent long years of study in France. Further running down of the problems presented by these cups and candlesticks and these engravings, carried on from an iconographical and documentary point of view alone, without examination or handling of the objects, shows that there was a large family of Germain in Paris in the first half of the eighteenth century, which for several generations carried on a profitable business as designers and makers of silverware—and, even more interesting, that for many years their principal client was the court of Portugal. Whether the pieces exhibited are hallmarked, or whether they have any peculiarities of metal or minor marking to indicate their Portuguese origin, I do not know, only that I am told they were purchased in Portugal as Portuguese silver—but simply on the facts as stated and upon a comparison of design with object, the doubt must be strong in anyone's mind whether these pieces of plate are not really French.

The exhibition also contains several objects and prints which, taken together, are interesting from yet another point of view. In most instances objects were made from prints produced specifically as designs for use in the arts and crafts, but on occasion the craftsman turned to his account material which he found in prints made for purely pictorial purposes. Thus in the gallery containing the early prints are shown a Gubbio plate, lent to the Museum by V. Everit Macy, and Marc Antonio's engraving of Dido, which has been copied by the maker of the plate as faithfully as he might. A large German woodcarving, in which Elizabeth and Mary and two of the other figures have been copied directly from the woodcut of the Visitation by Dürer, is hung alongside the much smaller print.

One of the principal differences between the groups of material shown in the three galleries is that whereas the English engravings are without exception designs of things, the French prints are in many cases not so much designs of things as the elab-

oration of motifs suitable, with modifications, for application to many uses. As a natural result, utterly unlike the English designs which are interesting only qua the furniture, etc., which they represent, many of the French ones are delightful and charming works of art in themselves, with a swing and grace and frequently a boldness of intention which are quite surprising. In the gallery containing the early prints a very large proportion of the frames contain engravings which, in the course of time, have come to be collected and valued simply as engravings without any reference to their possible utilitarian use. To show the way in which they were used in their time, several frames contain reproductions of prints placed alongside photographs of objects made from them, one instance being that of an Aldegrever, of which the original is included in the exhibition, accompanied by a stone pilaster, a stove tile, and a stoneware mug, each of which carries the design of the print in whole or in part. One should note also the facsimiles of leaf patterns by primitive German engravers, which by their marvelous linear accomplishment, their élan and simple surety of feeling and touch, take very high place in the hierarchy of beautiful ornament, and in the present exhibition at least, are only met in their own field by some of the spirited designs for ormolu by Peyrotte. Among the Italian Renaissance ornament prints and draw-

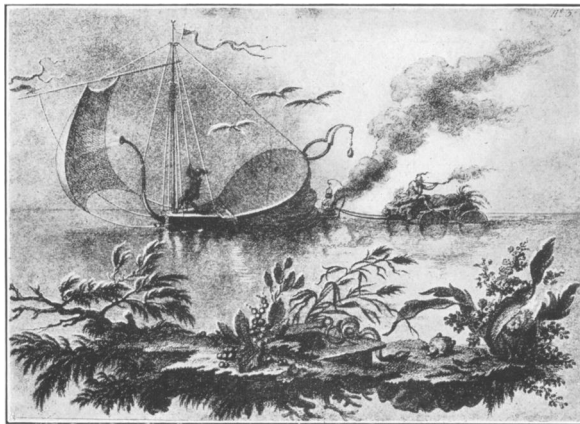
ings has been placed the Battle of the Sea Gods by Mantegna, in its own time used by workers in terracotta as a model for friezes, and subsequently so adapted and stolen from by such masters as Zoan Andrea, Beham, Aldegrever, and the Master of the Horse's Head, that it may be considered the fountain head of the stream of ornament distinguished by its use of the merman, fishes, and skulls of horses.

Finally one aspect of the exhibition should not be overlooked, and that is the way in which many of the artists were able out of pure foolishness to create the most dignified, the most charming, and the most alluring design. The most delightful of all the fancies possibly is that represented in the prints after Pillement for printed and embroidered fabrics. Surely nothing could be more impossible than those Chinese garden houses sitting on the tops of flights of rustic stairs which spring from flowers and are supported by charm alone. Yet who would not climb to them, sure at last to meet his *heure exquise*? And then that bellows-bark, the faster to travel so calmly puffing wind into its own sail! No pea-green boat, however well endowed with lots of money and plenty of honey, could to it compare. Might it not be taken as the symbol of all good ornament?

C'est l'instant, Messieurs, ou jamais

D'être audacieux. . . .

W. M. I., JR.



DESIGN BY JEAN PILLEMENT, FRENCH, LOUIS XV